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Criteria for Evaluating Hypothetical Egyptian Loan-Words in Greek: The Case of Αἴγυπτος

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Jay H. Jasanoff and Alan Nussbaum, in their recent critique of the Egyptian etymologies for Greek words proposed in Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, espouse an extreme form of positivism in evaluating (and largely rejecting) those proposals. They write that convincing examples of loan-words in Greek exhibit three features: "the semantic match between the Greek words and their Semitic and Egyptian counterparts is exact," "the identity of meaning is correlated with a striking similarity of form," and the loan-words "are for the most part completely isolated, not only in the sense that they lack convincing [Indo-European] etymologies but also in the sense that they are not visibly derived from other, simpler Greek words or roots." Jasanoff and Nussbaum allow for a certain degree of phonetic naturalization during the borrowing process, but explain this by saying that "the sounds of the source language are replaced by their closest equivalents in the target language."[1]

When it comes to specific loan-words, they write that "under any reasonable standard of philological rigor, the only genuinely old Egyptian borrowing in Greek" is Αἴγυπτος.[2] They are not alone in considering Αἴγυπτος, whatever its uniqueness in that regard, a virtually certain example of an Egyptian loan-word. Heinrich Brugsch's conjecture is commonly, and

[1] J. H. Jasanoff and A. Nussbaum, "Word Games: The Linguistic Evidence in *Black Athena*," in M. R. Lefkowitz and G. M. Rogers (eds.), *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill and London 1996) 177–205, at 184 and 188–89; cf. M. Bernal, *Black Athena* I–II (London 1987 and 1991). For more sympathetic appraisals of Bernal's etymologies, see G. A. Rendsburg, "*Black Athena*: An Etymological Response," *Arethusa*, Special Issue (Fall 1989) 67–82 and J. D. Ray, "An Egyptian Perspective," *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 3 (1990) 77–81. On the broader question of Egyptian loan-words in Greek, see most recently J.-L. Fournet, "Les emprunts du grec à l'égyptien," *Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* 84 (1989) 55–80.

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[2] Jasanoff and Nussbaum (previous note) 188.

with good reason, accepted[3] that this word is derived from the Egyptian term, *ḥ(w)t-kȝ-ptḥ*, /hatkapᶜta/, "the house of the *ka* (soul or spirit) of (the god) Ptah" (*Book of the Dead*, spell 15. 1 etc.), which is the religious name of *Mn-nfr*, "(Pharaoh Phiops I is) established and beautiful" or Memphis, the capital city of Egypt some forty kilometres upriver from the Nile delta. This city-name appears as *Ḥi-ku-(up-)ta-aḫ* in the Akkadian of the Tell El-Amarna Tablets (84. 37, 139. 8).[4] That the word had been borrowed into Greek already in the Mycenaean period is proved by the existence in Linear B of the adjectival form, a man's name, *A₃-ku-pi-ti-jo*, Αἰγύπτιος, based on the adjective derived from Αἴγυπτος (KN Db 1105 + 1446).[5]

The present article proposes to test Jasanoff and Nussbaum's criteria for evaluating loan-words against the oldest example that they allow, considering in turn the semantics, the phonetics, and the degree of isolation of Αἴγυπτος.

As to semantic content, while Egyptian *ḥ(w)t-kȝ-ptḥ* denotes a city, in Homer Αἴγυπτος denotes in the masculine the river Nile (*Od.* 3. 300 etc.) and in the feminine the land of Egypt (*Od.* 17. 448 etc.). In post-Homeric usage the word came to be used exclusively of the land and a new name had to be found specifically for the river. (The Linear B evidence suggests that this development had already begun in Mycenaean times: Aegyptius was an "Egyptian," rather than a "Nilotic man.") The Nile is an important landmark and so deserved a name, yet the Egyptians themselves did not give it one, calling it either simply "the river" (*itrw*) or, in the appropriate season, the annual "inundation" (*ḥᶜpy*).[6] The Greeks named the river after the most important city upon it and, needing a name for the whole country, quite naturally—for Egypt is the gift of the river (Hdt. 2. 5)[7]—applied that name in the feminine gender to the land as a whole. (Other peoples used other strategies: Akkadian calls it *Mi-iṣ-ri-i*, "the border land"[8] [cf. Hittite *Mi-iz-ri*, Hebrew *Miṣrayim*, Genesis 12. 10 etc., Mycenaean *Mi-sa-ra-jo*, KN F 841]; the Egyptians themselves called it various things, most notably *Kmt*, "the black (land)" [cf. Χημία, Plut. *Mor.* 364c], a term arguably

[3] H. Brugsch, *Geographische Inschriften altägyptischer Denkmäler* (Leipzig 1854) I 83; R. Pietschmann, "Aigyptos," *RE* I (1894) 979 (with reservations); A. H. Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* (Oxford 1947) II 124 §394, II 211 §435; A. B. Lloyd, *Herodotus. Book II* (Leiden 1976) II 4; and Bernal (above, note 1) I 95, II 443.

[4] S. A. B. Mercer, *The Tell El-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto 1939) I 300–01, II 464–65.

[5] L. R. Palmer, *The Interpretation of Mycenaean Greek Texts* (Oxford 1963) 179 and M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1973) 136.

[6] A. De Buck, "On the Meaning of the Name ḤᶜPJ," in *Orientalia Neerlandica* (Leiden 1948) 1–22.

[7] J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Hecataeus and Herodotus on 'A Gift of the River'," *JNES* 25 (1966) 57–65.

[8] M. Civil et al. (eds.), *The Assyrian Dictionary* X.2 (Chicago 1977) 116 and L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros*, 3rd ed. (Leiden 1995) 591.

familiar to the Mycenaean epic bards.)[9] The ambiguity that resulted from applying the same term to both river and land was resolved by coining, perhaps from Egyptian *nꜣ rꜣw-ḫꜣw(t)*, "the mouths of the front part,"[10] the term Νεῖλος (Hes. *Theog.* 338, Solon fr. 28 West, *Danais* fr. 1 Davies, Bernabé) to designate the river. There is nothing strange in all of this. Cities can give their names to lands, and Homer uses Σιδόνιοι to refer to the Phoenicians in general; cities can also share their names with rivers, for Σύβαρις and Σῖρις in the feminine denote cities and in the masculine the rivers on whose banks they stand. Semantically, therefore, the development from *ḥ(w)t-kꜣ-ptḥ* to Αἴγυπτος conforms perfectly to Greek usage. It falls far short, however, of Jasanoff and Nussbaum's requirement of an "exact semantic match."

The situation regarding the phonetics is probably similar, although complicated by our ignorance of the transmission-process. While in classical authors Egyptian words beginning with *ḥwt* are hellenized like Ἀθῶρ (from *Ḥt-ḥr*) and *Ptḥ* is transliterated as Φθά,[11] in early borrowings the second-declensional ending is normal, both for masculines and feminines (Αἴγυπτος was both, having a different gender for each of its two meanings). This is shown by many nouns with the pre-Greek -νθ- stem, e.g. ἡ ἀσάμινθος (Mycenaean *a-sa-mi-to*), ἡ Κόρινθος (Mycenaean *ko-ri-to*), and ὁ λαβύρινθος (Mycenaean *da-pu₂-ri-to-jo*). The -υπτ- element in Αἴγυπτος conforms perfectly to the Akkadian form, *Ḫi-ku-(up-)ta-aḫ*, its probable model. The gamma may be explained by postulating as a secondary intermediary language one of the pre-Greek tongues of Minoan Crete: From the fact that the Linear B signs *ka*, *ke*, *ki*, *ko*, and *ku* express both Greek /k/ and /g/ (so that, for example, *ke-ra* represents both κέρας and γέρας), we can deduce that the Minoan language originally expressed by the Cretan syllabic script made no phonological opposition between voiced and unvoiced stops. The only morphological puzzle is the first syllable, which for some reason combines the /a/ postulated for the vocalization of Egyptian *ḥ(w)t* and the /i/ into which it has been, again for unknown reasons, changed in the Akkadian form. The resultant diphthong has the happy effect of creating the considerable metrical flexibility, highly desirable in dactylic hexameter verse, revealed by Αἴγυπτος,[12] though both the rules of logic and the Mycenaean evidence preclude our thinking that metrical considerations *caused* this form. Thus, phonologically as well as semantically, the development is unexceptionable. But here, too, Jasanoff

[9] R. D. Griffith, "Homer's Black Earth and the Land of Egypt," *Athenaeum* 84 (1996) 251–54.

[10] H. Goedicke, "Νεῖλος—An Etymology," *AJP* 100 (1979) 69–72.

[11] P. Montet, quoted in Lloyd (above, note 3) II 4.

[12] The word appears in the *Odyssey* in all the oblique cases except the vocative, including both the uncontracted and contracted genitive forms, and with the postposition -δε, and it is positioned with the foot-division falling before either the ultima or the penult.

and Nussbaum's requirements are at fault, for there is anything but a "striking similarity of form" between /hatkapᵉta/ and /aiguptos/.

When it comes to Jasanoff and Nussbaum's third requirement, that of lexical isolation, we observe that there exists beside Αἴγυπτος, qua river-name, the simpler Greek root αἰγ- closely related to it in form and meaning. Rivers are often associated with goats in classical Greek toponyms, cult, and myth. (None of our evidence for this association dates to the Mycenaean period, at which time Αἴγυπτος had already assumed its classical form, but the nature of the Linear B texts virtually precludes their providing such information, and it is reasonable to assume that this connection is much earlier than its first attestation.) We have place-names such as the River Tragus in Arcadia (Paus. 8. 23. 2) or the roadstead of Aegospotami in the Thracian Chersonese (Hdt. 9. 119. 2), where the Athenians were finally defeated by Lysander (Xen. *Hell.* 2. 1. 18–19). Many other places near, in, or belonging to the sea have names formed from the αἰγ- root—Aegae on Euboea, where the Greeks returning from the Trojan war suffered a great storm (Alc. fr. 298. 6 Voigt), Mt. Aegaleos in Attica, whence Xerxes watched the battle of Salamis (Hdt. 8. 90; this word is indirectly attested in Mycenaean as the name of the province on the other side of the homonymous Messenian mountain, *pe-ra*$_3$*-ko-ra-i-ja*, *pe-ra-a-ko-ra-i-jo*, Περᾳγολαλία, Περα-αἰγολαhιοι), Aegina, the Aegean itself—and there is an obvious marine connection to the common nouns αἰγιαλός and αἶγες, which means "waves" according to Hesychius and the *Suda* s.v. and Artemidorus, *Onirocritica* 2. 12 (120. 1–2 Pack). It is uncertain whether αἶγες is the survival of a pre-Greek word for "sea,"[13] a metaphor of goats for waves, as whitecaps are the horses of Manannan Mac Lir in Irish myth,[14] or a derivative, cognate with αἴξ, from ἀΐσσω, "to move with a quick shooting motion" (LSJ s.v.; cf. Sanskrit *éjati*).[15] These marine words are relevant to rivers, because Greek makes no over-nice distinction between fresh-water and salt-, as both fall under the purview of Poseidon (Aesch. *Sept.* 310–11, Catull. 31. 3).[16]

[13] R. L. Fowler, "ΑΙΓ- in Early Greek Language and Myth," *Phoenix* 42 (1988) 95–113, esp. 99–102.

[14] P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* I (Paris 1968) 30, s.v. αἰγιαλός. For the horses of Manannan, cf. W. B. Yeats, "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" ("Chaunt in his ear delusions magical, That he may fight the horses of the sea") and Lady Gregory, *Gods and Fighting Men* (London 1904; repr. Gerrard Cross 1970) 105. Poseidon sends a bull out of a sea-wave at Eur. *Hipp.* 1213–14.

[15] P. Thieme, *Die Heimat der indogermanischen Gemeinsprache*, AAWMainz 11 (Wiesbaden 1954) 43; J. T. Hooker, "ΑΙΓΑΙΩΝ in Achilles' Plea to Thetis," *JHS* 100 (1980) 188–89.

[16] See G. O. Hutchinson, *Aeschylus. Septem contra Thebas* (Oxford 1985) 94–95, ad *Sept.* 310–11.

In cult, horned animals are offered to rivers.[17] Bulls are preferred at Troy and in Sicily (*Il.* 21. 130–33, Diod. 4. 23. 4), but bulls and goats are homologous in cult[18] and Greece is a land of goats.[19] Pubescent goats are an appropriate offering to springs (Hor. *Carm.* 3. 13); moreover the Athenians competed in their τραγῳδίαι or "goat-songs" for the privilege of sacrificing a goat to Dionysus,[20] the taurine god (Carm. pop. 871 *PMG*, Ion 744 *PMG*, Soph. fr. 959 Radt, Eur. *Bacch.* 100, 920–22), whom Plutarch describes (*Mor.* 365a) on the inspiration of a Pindar-passage (fr. 153 Maehler) as πάσης ὑγρᾶς φύσεως . . . κύριος.

In myth, too, horns are linked to rivers. A river's branches are its "horns" (Hes. *Theog.* 789 etc.), and in the case of the Nile the Greeks were most familiar with its branches, the "mouths of the front part." Amalthea, the goat (Aratus, *Phaen.* 163, Callim. *Jov.* 49), gave her cornucopia to Heracles in exchange for the horn that he broke off the river Achelous (Apollod. *Bibl.* 2. 7. 5), who, like other rivers (Eur. *Ion* 1261, *Or.* 1378, *IA* 275 etc.), is bull-formed (Archil. fr. 287 West, Soph. *Trach.* 10–14).[21] Capricorn (Αἰγόκερως, originally *αἰγοκέραος), believed to be among the forty-eight constellations taken over by the Greeks from Egypt (cf. Lucian, *De astrologia* 7),[22] has the form of a goat–fish hybrid (αἰγίπαν, Eratosth. *Cat.* 27). Interesting in this context is the αἴξ (Arist. *HA* 593b23), a water-bird[23] whose flight—it has been suggested on the basis of German folklore surrounding the similarly named *Himmelsgeiß*—was thought to presage storms.[24]

In light of this evidence, I suggest that the Greeks connected the Nile with goats, the more so since Ptah himself is horned, his incarnation being the Apis-bull (Hdt. 2. 38, 153, 3. 27–30)[25] and his function that of creation, like the ram-headed god, *Ḫnmw*.[26] Late grammarians certainly explained the term Αἴγυπτος along these lines, either because Egypt has "fat goats" (αἶγες πίονες, *Etym. Magn.* 29. 10) or because the Egyptians worship them and so allow the Nile to be "drunk by goats" (αἰγίποτος, ibid. 29. 8–9). The Egyptian goat-cult, centred at *bȝ-nb-Ḏdt*, "ram (or soul) of Lord *Ḏdt*," or Mendes in the delta since the second dynasty (Manetho 609 F 2 [p. 20]

[17] R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge 1951) 237, 249. With this custom is to be compared the offering of human hair—another emanation of the head—to rivers (*Il.* 23. 140–51, Aesch. *Cho.* 6–7).

[18] A. B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* I (Cambridge 1914) 501.

[19] J. E. Harrison, *Themis*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1927) 206.

[20] W. Burkert, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual," *GRBS* 7 (1966) 87–121.

[21] H. P. Isler, *Acheloos* (Berne 1970).

[22] W. H. Smyth, *A Cycle of Celestial Objects* II: *The Bedford Catalogue* (London 1844) 472–73.

[23] D. W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1936) 30.

[24] M. L. West, *Hesiod. Works and Days* (Oxford 1978) 366–68.

[25] Lloyd (above, note 3) II 171, ad Hdt. 2. 38.

[26] R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 2nd ed. (London 1985) 191–92, Glossary s.vv. "Khnum" and "Ptah."

FGrH), was striking to Greek eyes,[27] not least because it included public sexual intercourse between women and goats (Pind. fr. 201 Maehler, Hdt. 2. 46, Plut. *Mor.* 989a).

We will never know whether the identity of the initial syllable of Αἴγυπτος with the αἰγ- root is a coincidence or—as I think more likely—a case of popular etymology,[28] and modern philologists are not tempted by any derivation akin to those offered by the *Etymologicum Magnum*, both because the ending -υπτος, although it has completely transformed the original, has not produced a Greek word-forming suffix, and because by chance we can trace the word almost step by step as it enters Greek. Nevertheless, the word is not completely isolated from other, simpler Greek words, and if their influence (as opposed to coincidence) has indeed helped to determine its form, this naturalization has involved considerations quite different from a desire to replace the sounds of the source language by their closest equivalents in the target language.

The moral of this story is that Greek accommodated loan-words to its own native forms in ways rich in *Volkspoesie*.[29] We must never forget, as Kenneth Dover has said in another context, that "aesthetic caprice must be included among the determinants of linguistic form,"[30] nor should we be too quick to rule out as borrowings words that in sense, sound, and degree of isolation do not conform to the narrow expectations of a rigidly positivist approach to historical linguistics.

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[27] The Greeks, for whom the gods were of one race with humans (Pind. *Nem.* 6. 1) and so ἀνθρωποφυέες (Hdt. 1. 131), always found the Egyptian theriomorphic conception of divinity remarkable (cf. Socrates' oath μὰ τὸν κύνα τὸν Αἰγυπτίων θεόν, Pl. *Grg.* 482b5).

[28] C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford 1995) 170, suggests that αἰγυπιός, "vulture" (< *ἀργιπιός) is modelled on Αἰγύπτιος rather than the other way around.

[29] Similarly, Greek arguably accommodated the Persian proper name **a(h)ura-pāta*, "protected by Ahura (Mazda)," as ἀβροβάτης (Aesch. *Pers.* 1072, Bacchyl. *Epin.* 3. 48) from the phrase ἀβρὸν βαίνειν (e.g. Eur. *Med.* 1164): so M. Leumann in a private letter to B. Snell (see *Bacchylidis carmina cum fragmentis* [Leipzig 1963] 10–11, ad loc.); this suggestion has, however, been rejected by R. Schmitt, "Bakchylides' ἀβροβάτας und die Iranier-Namen mit Anlaut ABPA/O-," *Glotta* 53 (1975) 207–16.

[30] K. Dover, *Marginal Comment: A Memoir* (London 1994) 25. W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, transl. by M. E. Pinder and W. Burkert (Cambridge, MA 1992) 35, writes that "the Greek language, at any rate the literary Greek that we know, absolutely rejects the use of unadapted foreign words; they are accepted only in perfectly assimilated form as to phonetics and inflexion."